

into Tampa Bay just as it has throughout the past 150 years. Please join me in thanking all those who have served to keep its beacon lit and who continue to serve today with President Jim Spangler and the Egmont Key Alliance to keep its history alive and its structures sound.

LIGHTING THE WAY: THE EGMONT KEY
LIGHTHOUSE, TAMPA BAY SOUNDINGS
(By Captain Richard Johnson)

It has been 150 years since light keeper Sherrod Edwards first carried cans of lamp oil up the spiral staircase of the lighthouse on Egmont Key. But this magnificent beacon, rebuilt "to withstand any storm" after a hurricane in the late 1840s, still stands guard at the entrance to Tampa Bay, welcoming mariners and visitors.

The 71-foot-high lighthouse has been vital to the safety of commerce on Florida's west coast for more than a century. First constructed in 1848 to support commercial trade along the nation's Gulf Coast, it was the only lighthouse between the Panhandle and Key West. While guiding ships along the coast, it also marked the entrance to the increasingly important port of Tampa.

The first lighthouse was built with brick and cost \$10,000. It was located about 100 feet northeast of the existing structure on the north end of the island. The keeper's house, also brick, was constructed nearby for Edwards and his family. The lighthouse was first lit in April 1848 when they moved in. Less than six months later, in September, a hurricane ravaged the lighthouse. Stories say Edwards and his family took refuge in a rowboat tied to a palm tree as water rose over the island.

With the first tower damaged beyond repair, a new, taller lighthouse—which still stands today—was constructed in 1858 for \$16,000. Other buildings were added over the years. A small brick building was constructed in 1895 near the lighthouse to store lamp oil; a larger brick building erected in the 1920s housed the island's radio transmitter.

Other structures have since been torn down. Two large sheds near the bayside dock served as a depot for navigational buoys along Florida's Gulf Coast in the late 1800s. For a time, all buoys between St. Marks and Key West were maintained and stored on Egmont Key. An assistant light keeper's house was added in 1899. All that remains of that house is a cistern, which is still used today.

Over the years, numerous improvements were made to the light station and the dock was rebuilt several times. Almost every recorded annual report to the Lighthouse Board includes some reference to repairs, improvements or rebuilding, mostly to mitigate damage from storms.

The life of the lighthouse keeper was not easy. For the most part, the light keeper, his assistant and their families were the only people on the island. Bulk supplies like oil for the light were brought in just once a year, and the families raised much of their own food, while traveling by small boat to Bradenton or Tampa for other supplies.

Maintaining a lighthouse with an oil lamp required constant attention to trimming and adjusting wicks, cleaning the chimney and lenses, and washing the windows of the lantern room. While the light was bright and well-focused for an oil lamp, it was not nearly as bright as an electric light, and scrupulous attention to maintaining the cleanliness of every part of the system was necessary to ensure that the light would not be obscured. Each day they worked from dawn until about 10 a.m. just cleaning up and preparing the light for the next night's work.

Curtains hung from dawn until dusk to prevent discoloration of the lens glass.

In 1939, the Coast Guard took over the lighthouse service and converted the newer light-keeper's house into a barracks for a small crew. A few years later, the lighthouse was renovated. With the upper portion of the brick tower deteriorating, the tower was trimmed several feet for stabilization, and an aircraft-style rotating beacon replaced the original oil lamp. Illumination surged from 3,000 candlepower to 175,000 candlepower, visible on a clear night from as far as 22 miles away.

But it wasn't until the late 1980s that the light was fully automated and the Coast Guard personnel reassigned. Shortly after that the Florida State Park Service joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in caring for the island's natural resources.

Through the years, a series of light keepers about whom we know very little, worked through heat and hurricane, battling mosquitoes and winter gales, to keep the Egmont light working and the station in good order. Even with modern advances in navigation, the light remains an important aid to mariners and aviators destined for Tampa Bay.

Capt. Richard Johnson, president of the Egmont Key Alliance, teaches sailing at the St. Petersburg branch of the Annapolis Sailing School. For more information on Egmont Key or the Egmont Key Alliance, call 727-867-8102.

EGMONT KEY, FLORIDA,
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Description: When Florida was under British control, surveyor George Gauld named the small island found at the entrance to Tampa Bay Egmont Key, after John Perceval, second Earl of Egmont and First Lord of the Admiralty. Through the years, the island has served as home to two lighthouses, a fort, a movie theater, a cemetery, boat pilots, and a radio beacon. Today, all that remains on the island is a truncated lighthouse, crumbling remains of the fort, a small colony of gopher tortoises, and a park ranger to interpret the island's history.

In 1833, the Secretary of the Treasury received multiple petitions for a lighthouse at Egmont Key to assist vessels transiting Florida's Gulf Coast between Key West and the Panhandle. However, it wasn't until after Florida achieved statehood in 1845 and its legislature petitioned Congress in December of 1846, that funds were granted for the Egmont Key Lighthouse. Francis A. Gibbons of Baltimore signed a contract with the government to provide a lighthouse and dwelling at a cost of \$6,250.

The contract called for a 40-foot, brick tower, topped with an octagonal lantern that would shelter 13 lamps backed by 21-inch reflectors. The lighting apparatus was supplied by Winslow Lewis at a cost of \$1,330. The St. Marks customs collector, a Mr. Walker, who oversaw the construction, recommended that "in consequence of the heavy gales of wind in this country," the 34 x 20, one-story, brick dwelling should "be placed at least 100 feet from the tower, so in case of its prostration, the house and lives would not be endangered." Walker also insisted that the tower be built on a foundation of driven pilings rather than on a foundation of "dry shells and sand" as promoted by the frugal Stephen Pleasonton, Fifth Auditor of the Treasury.

Work began on the lighthouse during the summer of 1847, and the lamps were to be lit by January 1, 1848 according to the contract. However, the supply ship Abbe Baker, which was transporting bricks from New York for the lighthouse, ran aground on Orange Key, and roughly half of the bricks had to be tossed overboard to refloat the ship. By Feb-

ruary of 1848, the tower stood at a height of twenty feet, but work was halted until a new shipment of bricks arrived. The tower was officially certified on April 19, 1848, and shortly thereafter Sherrod Edwards, the first keeper of the Egmont Key Lighthouse, activated the light. At that time, the lighthouse was the only one between Key West and St. Marks.

On September 23, 1848 a powerful hurricane covered Egmont Key with several feet of water. Keeper Edwards and his family, according to local legend, survived the storm by seeking refuge in a small boat tethered to a Palmetto tree. Shortly thereafter, Keeper Edwards rowed his family ashore and resigned. It was likely due to Walker's pile foundation that the tower survived the storm. The lighthouse was subsequently struck by lightning, which opened cracks in the tower. In 1854, a concrete pad was poured around the base of the tower, but by 1856, it was apparent that a replacement tower was necessary.

A new tower, twice as tall as the original, was completed in 1857 near the northern end of Egmont Key, and probably ninety feet inland from the previous tower. A fixed-light produced by a third-order Fresnel lens was exhibited from a focal plane of eighty-six feet starting in 1858.

In 1861, keeper George V. Rickard found himself caught in a struggle for control of the lighthouse. The collector in Key West was loyal to the Union, while the collector at St. Marks sided with the Confederates. Rickard feigned allegiance to Union blockaders near the island, until their absence allowed him to flee the island. After crating up the Fresnel lens, Rickard absconded to Tampa with the lens and as many supplies as he could transport.

The lighthouse soon fell under Union control and was reactivated using a makeshift light. After the war, a fourth-order lens was used until 1893, when it was replaced by a third-order lens with a red sector.

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, Fort Dade, part of a comprehensive coastal defense system, was constructed on the island. Named for the army commander, who along with his detachment, was killed by Seminole Indians in 1835, the fort, along with Fort DeSoto on Mullet Island to the northeast, stood watch over the entrance to Tampa Bay. The fort was staffed during World War I as well, and by the time it was deactivated in 1923, a movie theater, bowling alley, tennis courts, and miles of brick roads were found on the island.

In 1944, the upper portion of the lighthouse was removed along with the Fresnel lens, and a Double Head DCB-36 Rotating Beacon was placed on top of the capped tower. The remaining keeper's dwelling was demolished in 1954 and replaced by a one-story barracks. In 1974, Egmont Key became a National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The island was also added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, due to the lighthouse and remains of Fort Dade. The lighthouse was automated in 1989 when the present optic, a DCB-24 Rotating Beacon was installed, and today the Florida Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service work together to manage the island.

In November of 2008, a celebration was held on the island to commemorate the 150th birthday of the Egmont Key Lighthouse. In preparation for the event, the lighthouse received a new coat of paint thanks to the Tampa Bay Rough Riders and volunteers from the Coast Guard. A new plaque was unveiled at the base of the lighthouse during the festivities, and birthday cake was served to over 200 people. For the past several years, Christmas lights have been placed on